In Liberal Eugenics, Nicholas Agar advocates the right of parents to choose certain characteristics for their children through the use of genetic technologies. As such, the ‘eugenics’ detailed in this text has far more in common with free-market liberalism - and indeed consumerism - than historical antecedents of social engineering. Agar’s intention is to define and defend ‘liberal’ or ‘new’ eugenics, a movement that strikes its deepest chord in the USA but has encountered robust social and philosophical challenges in Europe. His vision of 21st Century eugenics is not a state-imposed attempt to improve human ‘stock’, but rather an extension of the reproductive freedoms that are increasingly taken for granted throughout much of the developed world.

An expansion of Agar’s 1998 article of the same name,(1) this text provides a valuable and relatively inclusive survey of opinion for and against parental access to genomic technologies in order to improve their offspring. The author’s perspective is liberal and pluralist, largely dismissing both utilitarian and deontological approaches which he believes ‘seem forced to choose between absurdity and silence when they confront enhancement technologies’ (p.42). Instead, Liberal Eugenics relies on two philosophical techniques to explore and elucidate issues.

The first is the application of what Agar terms ‘pragmatic optimism’: He asks the reader to set aside technical or practical barriers and imagine a future in which genetic technologies have been perfected. This optimistic approach to practicalities allows one to step beyond current limitations and more clearly analyse broader issues. For example, a key argument for the moral status of fertilised ova is their potential to develop into persons. However, cloning via nuclear transfer suggests that any somatic cell might provide the nucleus for a new life. Pragmatic optimism allows one to foresee a point at which this technology has been perfected, thus imbuing all human cells – even discarded skin cells – with the potential to furnish the genetic material for a new person. Thus, argues Agar, pragmatic optimism suggests ways in which cloning technology may alter our perceptions of genetic potential - directly affecting the moral status afforded embryos.

Pragmatic optimism is thus a useful approach that helps to clarify larger issues and to identify new dilemmas. However, it is also a rhetorical technique that serves the author’s intentions well, namely by presupposing the eventual triumph over technical and ethical obstacles, and the inevitability of parental access to genetic technologies. His conclusion, for instance, proposes that the moral barrier currently blocking experimental genomic enhancements will in the future be overcome not by reasoned debate or
social agreement, but via 'underground' researchers working outside of ethical limitations.

The bulk of the book pivots on Agar's second philosophical technique, an analysis of issues via the use of 'moral images', which he defines as follows: 'The moral image of an unfamiliar practice is another practice chosen both for its similarity to the problematic practice and the fact that it elicits moral reactions of which we are confident' (p.39). The three key moral images explored are of the new eugenic technologies conceptualised as 'therapy', 'nature' or 'nurture'. Under the moral image of 'therapy' for example, Agar surveys moral principles pertaining to current therapeutic interventions and considers whether or not these would apply to genetic 'corrections' or enhancements. For instance, by encouraging women to reduce potentially harmful behaviours such as smoking or drinking while pregnant, a more healthy child is likely to result than would otherwise have been the case. Similarly, argues Agar, genomic alterations can also reduce unwanted or unhealthy traits in an embryo. If we accept that both approaches would benefit a specific embryo – without recourse to termination - then both 'conventional doctors and gene therapists act morally in allowing a healthy baby to be born in place of an unhealthy one' (p.69).

The author uses the technique of moral images to propose two important contentions on parental access to gene technologies. Using the moral image of genetic enhancements as 'nurture', he observes the widespread acceptance of the right of parents to provide an environment that they believe benefits or enhances their children. If we permit parents this freedom, why not allow use of genetic technologies to promote the same ends? Agar contends that if environmental and genetic means both lead to equal (and desirable) ends in creating an individual, then they should both carry the same moral weight. Likewise, by using the moral image of 'nature', Agar explores the situation of individuals who are genetically disadvantaged – or gifted – and proposes that if a favourable genetic combination occurs naturally in some individuals, then it is not morally wrong to engineer that combination into others.

There is no clear distinguishing line drawn between therapy and enhancement, because in the liberal eugenic stance both arise from the same desire, namely to optimise outcomes for offspring. Likewise, Agar believes that neither environment nor genes should be privileged over the other when creating the best possible outcomes for one's children. Indeed, he argues that historically, genetic alterations have been the subject of unfair prejudice compared with environmental manipulation, and that this imbalance should be redressed if both are shown to offer equal benefits to parents and their children. His points on these issues are insightful, well argued and convincing, but the use of the moral images technique does run the risk of argument via analogy rather than by analysis. One could, for instance, accept Agar's 'nature' analogy and engineer into an individual a favourable genetic trait that has occurred naturally in others. However, even in a 'pragmatically optimistic' future such alterations may also have undesirable consequences; the very process of engineering these traits shifts the ethical responsibility for adverse outcomes from 'nature' onto those who authorise and conduct such procedures (i.e. regulators, parents and gene therapists).

The text optimistically presupposes that provision of sufficient information will lead parents to make autonomous, well-reasoned and socially valid choices in engineering the genomes of their progeny. Many contemporary issues question such a confident belief in free-market consumerism. Witness the growing epidemic of childhood (and adult) obesity in an environment of unparalleled access both to foodstuffs and to nutritional information. The book would thus benefit from recourse to studies of consumer behaviour and social pressures toward reproductive conformity. Social coercion need not be imposed by the state: the current availability of limited prenatal diagnostics has already profoundly changed the reproductive landscape, creating considerable social pressure to discard fetuses with 'undesirable' features. For instance, the number early terminations for non-lethal (and lethal) birth defects approximately doubled in Victoria, Australia between 1990 and 2000.(2)

Agar nevertheless accepts that some level of state and medical governance is required in order to minimise poor or harmful parental choices. However, an underlying weakness of this work is its unwillingness to address the 'slippery slope' of genetic alterations; with the specific exception of skin colour, there is little solid guidance on where and how limits on genetic choices should be set, if at all. While the history of state control hangs heavy over the proponents of eugenic philosophies, it is surely beholden on them to suggest a workable system of regulation that promotes reproductive choice without declining into